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# Seeing Voices and Hearing Pictures: Image as discourse and the framing of image-based research

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This paper addresses an increasingly popular technique for eliciting student “voice” through the analysis of young people’s images as a medium of expression, focusing in particular on photography. Of course, there has been considerable critical interrogation of student voice activities in the recent past and the complexities and challenges associated with the analysis of images is longstanding. Where critical scrutiny is less apparent, however, is in the interpretation of children and young people’s visual “statements”. We argue that young people’s images should be subject to the same processes of deconstruction as other texts produced under the aegis of voice activities and conclude by suggesting that the crisis of representation familiar in most interpretive genres is sometimes absent from what tends to be an uncritical celebration of representation in this particular context.

## Seeing Voices

But truth is so dear to me, and so is the seeking to make true, that indeed I believe, I believe I would still rather be a cobbler than a musician with colours. (van Gogh)

While accepting that not all researchers and professionals who use visual images in their work with children and young people exemplify every problem discussed here, we suggest that a growing body of work deserves closer and more careful scrutiny. Those who have sought new and more effective ways of encouraging pupil “voice” (in line with United Nations imperatives, 1989, and subsequent related legislation), plus other readers, will be familiar with some of the arguments. This paper addresses an increasingly popular technique for eliciting pupil “voice”: that which is based on giving young people cameras to enable them to record aspects of their life and, in some cases, to use these photographs as a prompt to talking about their thoughts and experiences (e.g. Kaplan & Howes, 2004; Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998; Stanley, 2003; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). We argue that although there is great potential in this approach, especially in terms of generating multi-layered data, there are problems in

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the way it is sometimes employed, especially in relation to interpretation and representation. Further, we suggest that the claims made about personal and social “transformation” through photography should be subject to critical scrutiny.<sup>1</sup>

There is a tendency for children to be regarded as “natural performers”, happy to make models, draw pictures or use a camera as “a medium for them to see themselves and let others see them” (Santorineos & Dimitriadi, 2006, p. 152). Some go so far as to suggest that images children and young people produce, “speak for themselves”, have a “verisimilitude” (Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 76), and express an “authenticity” that words cannot, as they take us “inside the mind of the subject” (p. 77). Related to this, it is sometimes claimed that they take us “closer to the work and lives of teachers and students” (Walker, 2004, p. 141) by “cutting through some of the levels of pretence, posing and editing self-presentation that frequently dominate when using other research methods” (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 237). Other expansive claims are made for some of these techniques, including developing self-esteem and self-confidence (Young & Barrett, 2001), community building (Burke, 2006), and personal and social “transformation” (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Gallagher (2004) claims that a model-making project about a local park “speaks to the depth of knowledge, and lack of political agenda, which may permit children to be designers and advocates for change in their neighbourhoods” (p. 251).

We discern a hesitation to engage critically with these “visual texts”, perhaps because of their novelty and perhaps because such questions appear to sanction the status quo in terms of pupil–teacher relations. It is sometimes suggested that the meanings involved are transparently available to audiences, through a direct connection with the “unconscious” of the artist’s mind (Furth, 2002; Swennen, Jorg, & Korthage, 2004), and sometimes as a consequence of an unspecified “power” the images are regarded as having (Schratz and Steiner-Löffler, 1998; Schratz & Walker, 1995). Hyde (2005), for example, suggests that some of the photographs produced under the aegis of Wendy Ewald are “monuments [which] speak to the present, future and past all at once” (p. 189). This interpretation is, perhaps, partly a consequence of what Barthes (1981) describes as the tautology of photography. In an era where “pupil voice” initiatives are promoted on the basis that they will allow adults access to the “realities” of children’s lives (Mizen, 2005, see later), the photograph may appear to provide even more tangible evidence of a tangible “truth”. We have further concerns, however, when these “truths” are “translated” by adults. It is an example of this sort of work that we will turn to shortly.

Others have suggested that images of “real life”, generally, have been under-theorised. Hammond (2004) describes an absence of critique in relation to still images in anthropology. Ruby (2005) goes further and laments that ethnographic film has not been subject to sufficient scrutiny. One optimistic but unknown assumption that Ruby identifies is that exposure to images of people or groups who are unfamiliar to us will have a humanising and tolerance-raising effect. This perhaps helps to explain the recent enthusiasm of Aid organisations, such as Save the

Children, for photovoice work (O'Hagan, 2005), and for the power of the photograph to evoke empathy (Oxfam, 2006). Yet such images can portray the exotic Other, ensuring that they remain "they" and we remain "we" (Said, 1978), "reinforcing audiences' ethnocentric notions" (Martinez, 1992, p. 161). This can apply not only to those of different cultures, or different classes, but also to those of different ages.

We suggest that it is necessary to problematise the production, distribution, reception, and consumption of all such visual images as research questions, as part of the whole process in which they are being deployed. We reiterate Ruby's (2005) call for attention to the "social processes" surrounding visual objects. We need an "anthropology of pictorial media" (p. 163), he says, in order to offset the naïve use of images; we need to ask the same critical questions, in other words, of the "eye" that have been asked of the "voice". Here, through recourse to some of the achievements of semiotics and through consideration of both meaning and use, we hope to support a more aware and reflexive understanding of visual images in research with children and young people.

### **Hearing Pictures**

Given the history of critique within the western tradition of anthropology (e.g. Hammond, 2004), semiotics (e.g. Rose, 2001), art history (e.g. Pollock, 1996), visual studies (e.g. Pink, 2001), and philosophy (Barthes, 1981; Derrida, 1987), some problems in the interpretation of visual material provided by young people could have been anticipated. A work of art which has been subjected to much critique (which some have likened to a war trial and/or territorial dispute—see Glendinning, 1998) is one of van Gogh's paintings of shoes (Figure 1). We offer a brief résumé of some key contributions to this debate, to help orientate a way through some of our later arguments relating to pupil "voice".

In fact we know little of the shoes themselves (assuming van Gogh has painted a still "life"); there is even some dispute as to which painting some writers are referring to. We do not know why van Gogh chose to paint shoes (although the quotation at the start of the paper may or may not provide some clue), whose shoes they are, or why he chose to create a series of such paintings. The absence of information of what the painter intended has perhaps fuelled the imagination (not that we would suggest there is a resolvable relationship between stories of "origins" and outcomes, that might finally "settle" interpretation). Our story begins with an extraction from a poetic essay by Heidegger from around 1935.

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stands forth. In the stiffly solid heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather there lies the dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the filed-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the

fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. (Heidegger, 1976, p. 663)



Figure 1. A pair of shoes by Vincent van Gogh, Paris, 1886, oil on canvas, 72 × 55 cm; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Heidegger did not identify which painting of shoes he was writing about, but Schapiro (see below) was later informed it was the 1886 painting (Figure 1). Heidegger's concern was with deconstructing the "origin" of the piece of work, yet he also believed any such deconstruction to be necessarily confined by the circularity of its origin (the signified is just another signifier that signifies the signified). Therefore, for Heidegger "art can only ever be used to describe itself in the same way that a compass is used to describe a circle" (Wortham, 1996, p. 47), where the truth must be represented in the painting. He was not interested in the painting as a work of art; rather, his primary concern was the truth narrated/created via the painting, and so he invoked a hermeneutic circle consisting of truth, art, and artwork. He considered art and artist as replacing one another as source—both being mutually

dependent in an antagonistic dependency. According to Heidegger, van Gogh's painting expresses the being or essence of a peasant woman's shoes and her relation to nature and work. However, he appears to overlook some important issues: the artist's presence in his work, even though much of van Gogh's work is considered to be autobiographical; the existence of the series of paintings, which van Gogh may have intended to suggest multiple realities on different discourses with varying constructions; and also his own presence in his analysis:

His peasant background made it possible for him to understand the world of the peasant woman. His early years were spent in Messkirch (Baden) and his later pastoral moments in Todnauberg (Schwarzwald) where he could observe, speak with and even blend into the world of a peasant life in the Germany of the 1930s. (Silverman, 1994, p. 137)

This background may help us see why Heidegger interpreted the painting in the way he did. Schapiro (writing in 1968) is another who perhaps similarly projected his own story into the painting. He disputed Heidegger's attribution of the shoes to a peasant woman and insisted the shoes belonged to van Gogh himself, and/or that the painting should be regarded as a symbolic self-portrait, given his practice generally. In doing so, Schapiro attempts to uproot the shoes and move them into the world of the metropolis, so as to attribute them to the city dweller. He argued that Heidegger deceived himself by retaining a set of associations with peasants and the soil, which is not sustained by the picture itself, but is actually grounded in his social outlook with its emphasis on the pathos of the primordial and earthy. Heidegger "imagined everything and projected it into the painting" (Schapiro, 1968, p. 206). However, Schapiro, in making van Gogh signatory of the painting, making him both subject and object, prevents the shoes from going anywhere: "they're not only grounded, they're rooted to the spot, stuck" (Wortham, 1996, p. 52). Yet Heidegger and Schapiro are both keen to restitute the shoes to their rightful owner, Heidegger to the peasant woman and Schapiro to van Gogh; Schapiro even returns later to reiterate and justify his earlier account (Schapiro, 1994).

Derrida takes issue with both these interpretations, seeking to destabilise the positivistic pursuit in the authentication of oeuvres. Derrida brings in the "police" to assist in his "proof" gathering (Schneider Adams, 1996), and identifies a commonality in the need for both Heidegger and Schapiro to attribute the shoes either to the peasant woman or the city dweller. Derrida is more concerned with the "trap" one writer sets for another, and notes that in French the word *lacet* means both "lace" and "trap" (snare). Derrida proposes that it is best not to attempt to render anything to anything, as such things are made to trap, and as every bet is a trap, we would do better to just "bet on the trap" (Derrida, 1987, p. 382). He considers it is no accident that the laces are loose, a condition that separates the shoes from their owner, from each other, and from their surroundings. He also notes that both Heidegger and Schapiro assume the shoes to be a pair, and comments: "the more I look at them . . . the less they look like an old pair. More like an old couple" (Derrida, 1987, p. 278). He adds that if the shoes are not a pair they cannot be used

“without injuring the wearer, unless he [*sic*] has the feet of a monster” (p. 374). He adds that this impulse towards pairing relates directly to the binary opposition where presence seeks absence. Heidegger has severed a single painting from a series in order to attribute, restitute, or institute the pair (says Schapiro), while Schapiro extracts a few lines from Heidegger’s much longer text to attribute, restitute, and institute them otherwise (says Derrida). Derrida claims that we cannot give the shoes back to the artist (the author is dead both literally and metaphorically), but neither can we keep them for ourselves as that requires us to project and imagine. However, by arguing that there can be no definitive “author” (because of the impossibility of defining, ultimately, intention) Derrida also inevitably writes van Gogh out of his account.

While there are many other contributors to this debate, and many takes on the above accounts, we conclude with Jameson (1995) whose particular focus is fetishism. He too relies on a privileging of origin story and agrees with Schapiro that the shoes belong to the “city dweller” in an age of “industrial technology”, rather than the “peasant” in an age of “artisan production” (Derrida, 1987, p. 263). In order to argue his case for fetishism, Jameson requires the shoes to be heterosexual (in other words a pair). Yet some have noted he is talking about a different pair of shoes than those most critics identify with Heidegger’s discussion.<sup>2</sup> And such is his concern with fetishism, and his *need* for a “pair”, that he mis-remembers what Derrida has written, claiming Derrida remarked somewhere: “the van Gogh footgear are heterosexual” (Jameson, 1995, p. 8), which is precisely the opposite of what Derrida said.

Wortham provides a postscript to the various arguments. Heidegger, he claims, insists the shoes are not merely a pictorial illustration, but that the painting does in fact show truth (a reversal of subject and object); Schapiro returns the shoes to the artist, assigning subjecthood to the shoes, and by giving the shoes eyes, the shoes can be restituted back to the artist; for Derrida the shoes bring blindness that demands our “critical vigilance”, but vision can proceed from what is concealed when blindness and insight play off against each other (Derrida, 1987, p. 279). Jameson, adopting an uncritical gaze, regards and discards the shoes in “a postmodern wink of an eye”, wrongly identifies them as heterosexual, and anyway confuses which shoes everyone has been talking about.

These selected commentators on van Gogh’s painting,<sup>3</sup> and the “interlaced” stories they tell, suggest a series of possible “traps” for the interpretation of images. Between them they write the author out of his work and insert their own stories. Given the normality of such a process, it is perhaps surprising that most accounts ignore this in their commentaries. Interpretations presented as fact suggest “mastery” over the image; they provide a synecdoche (their story) from a metonym (the shoes) and, in different ways the context in which the image has been made is ignored, most obviously in Derrida’s account. The “death” of the author suggests not just an inability to *know* intention, but an absence of conscious intention. Perhaps only Berger addresses this point:

I can think of no other European painter whose work expresses such a stripped respect for everyday things without elevating them, in some way, without referring to salvation by way of an ideal which the things embody or serve . . . The chair is a chair, not a throne. The boots have been worn by walking. The sunflowers are plants, not constellations . . . And from this nakedness . . . came his capacity to love, suddenly and at any moment, what he saw in front of him. (Berger, 2001)

### Image as Discourse

We turn now to a consideration of an article by Mizen (2005) which appeared in the journal *Visual Studies*. As space is of a premium we refer any reader directly to that paper, as we inevitably paraphrase and select so as to advance our argument. We consider this article not because we believe it represents the worst of its kind; rather because it is typical of a type of analysis and argument (see also Hyde, 2005; Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998; Strack et al., 2004; Swennen et al., 2004). Mizen describes an Economic & Social Research Council-funded project in which the team (Mizen, Pole, and Bolton) had attempted to understand more about young people's experiences of "light work" (those under 16 can legally engage in "light work"<sup>4</sup>). Essentially this is the sort of work young people do in the evenings, at weekends, and in school holidays. Young people engaged in "light work" attend (officially at least) school full-time. The paper is carefully set up, and prior to embarking on a description of the project, Mizen demonstrates his awareness of pertinent issues: "images can be visually striking yet analytically 'thin'" (2005, p. 126, paraphrasing Becker, 1995). However, he soon argues that photographs taken by the young people provide a "unique, source of evidence" which moves "beyond this illustrative function, to offer a deeper understanding" (p. 124).

In brief, the project engaged 69 young people who kept written diaries, met for focus group discussions, had informal chats over the 12-month period of the project, and were also invited to become "researcher photographers". Thirty-nine became involved in the photographic element of the work after being given some instruction in the technical skills required. The young people kept photo diaries in which they "were encouraged to use photography to illustrate, document and reflect upon their work and employment" (Mizen, 2005, p. 126). How to achieve this was up to them. Once the photo diaries were complete, the young people were asked to select six photos and "to reflect in writing upon what their chosen images signified" or were intended to express (p. 126). On the face of it we might expect Mizen to experience fewer (or maybe different) problems when writing about these photographs than those who interpreted van Gogh's shoes; the sample of "photographers" are very much alive and could provide an account of their thinking. However, after initially informing us that the selected images by the young people created "a sense of disappointment" for the researchers, as the number of images of the children working were scarce (which since the young people were invited to be the photographers was perhaps inevitable), absence quickly seeks presence and we learn that this "initial disappointment was . . . tempered by a growing realization of what



the children had presented” (p. 128). Mizen describes how the sequences of photographs allow us to get a sense of the “scale, nature and monotonous character of [the] work”, and how it was one thing to be told about the different things that these young people do, but that when he saw the images, “the scale of the work and of these children’s endeavours became more fully apparent”. He adds that the photos are “a valuable, possibly unique, source of insight into the characters, form, process and social relations that govern the economy of child employment in a wealthy nation” (p. 125).

The paper presents the reader with all six of Cassie’s photographs, but only a selection from the other young people. Cassie was 13 when the photographs were taken and worked in a hairdresser’s salon on Saturdays and during school holidays.



Figure 2. From “A little ‘light work’? Children’s images of their labour”, by Phil Mizen, 2005, *Visual Studies*, 20, p. 134. Copyright 2005 by Phil Mizen. Reprinted with permission

The photographs (Figure 2) appear to be of Cassie acting at working rather than of Cassie actually working; most obviously this is evident in the fact that she appears to be the only one “working” in the salon. There are good reasons why the images might be staged rather than real (the difficulty of taking photographs in a busy salon, the need to ask permission from lots of different people, and so on). Whatever the reasons for this staging, we can discern at minimum that whoever has taken the photographs has done so with some care. Each of the images is carefully framed, putting Cassie’s work into a wider context which provides a real sense of the physical space within which she works, and produces a series which has a narrative thread and coherence. The photographs are not “snatched” or taken covertly or furtively—quite the opposite—they look like an advertisement for the salon. There is a sense of pride in the way Cassie holds herself in the pictures, including holding the photographer’s gaze, and in her accompanying commentary: “giving the desks a quick wipe over”; “towel drying a customer’s hair”; “answering the phone”; “tidying up the shelves and towels”; “washing hair for the first time”; “greeting a customer and taking her coat”. Whoever has helped Cassie take these photographs also has pride, we would argue, in completing the photographic task and maybe, wider than that, in the salon itself.

We did also wonder why this was the first time Cassie had washed someone’s hair—and suspect it was as a consequence of being involved in the photographic project. In a small but obvious way, then, the research process was responsible for the “truth” that was told, rather than the “truth” preceding the research. However, Mizen offers a very different sort of account and raises no questions about the production of the series. He says the photographs provided by Cassie are “a clever and revealing cameo of her job in a small hairdressing salon . . . Individually the photographs tell us a great deal about the specifics of Cassie’s employment. Taken together they say as much about the travails of a child worker” (2005, p. 134). How Mizen makes this synodochic shift is not immediately apparent. While the six photos represent a series which may have the potential to illustrate a “bigger” picture, the nature of this was not obvious from our reading. However, it becomes evident that the story Mizen wants to tell is the story of “child” employment as unremitting gloom. We might wonder whether, like Heidegger and Schapiro, Mizen is projecting something of himself into this analysis or rather “referring to salvation by way of an ideal” (Berger, 2001). While we know nothing of Mizen personally, we know from his university’s website that his professional interest in labour studies dates at least from the late 1990s:

His . . . research interests are the sociology of youth and child labour . . . A major element of [Mizen’s] work in this area has been an interest in how young people have been forced to bear a disproportionate burden of the costs of state restructuring as the Keynesian welfare state was repudiated through the rise of monetarism and, more recently, “New Labour’s” Third Way.<sup>5</sup>

Further pictures selected for the paper by other young people include shots of employers, and Mizen includes the young people’s comments: “This is Debbie and she is my boss [at the caravan park] as you can see she is a very happy person” (Fiona

aged 14, East Anglian Coastal town, who has selected a photo of Debbie who is looking not at all happy); “The man in the picture is my boss. He owns the place. This is a rare opportunity to see him behind the counter as he never works” (Noel aged 14, South Wales valley).

Mizen again adds his own layer of interpretation and tells us:

Unused to being the object of the children’s interest, the tables turned momentarily as their child employee took control, each looks back with a degree of obvious discomfort. For example, in one of Fiona’s photographs we see her employer at a static caravan holiday park, seated at a cluttered desk but clearly displeased with the photographer’s attentions. (2005, p. 137)

So too with Noel’s hurriedly taken photograph of his employer leaning awkwardly on a shop counter. Our privilege in viewing him, we were told, is matched by the rarity of his physical presence. Noel’s comment is equally suggestive of one further and simpler explanation for the understatement of employers: the children were sometimes left to manage on their own. (2005, p. 137)

We are reminded of Heidegger’s projections again here: this is not just a tale where children are making a real and largely unseen contribution, mainly in service industries, but it is a tale of deep and abject exploitation, because these “children” are sometimes left to “run the show” themselves. This is, of course, implicit in the images of Cassie; it is as if she runs the hairdressing salon single handed. This is communicated largely (we believe) because the photographs are staged and not really of Cassie working at all. Ironically, what Mizen does not tell us when describing those images (but mentions later in the paper) is that “in one or two instances, like the example of Cassie’s vignette above . . . their employers were *even* willing to lend a hand” (our emphasis). These are not Cassie’s photographs at all, then, but her employer’s. Shouldn’t this information be central to any interpretation? We wonder what the rationale might be for inserting typographical distance between his analysis of Cassie’s images and this information about her employer. And why would Mizen not want to include this insight into employer–employee relations in his analysis of exploitation? We discern in Mizen’s use of “even” a lack of “even-handedness” on his part. In relation to the photographs *of* employers is it possible that Fiona and Noel offer subversive humour? And what could that suggest for power relations between employer and employee?

While Heidegger and Schapiro “framed” van Gogh’s painting in their different ways, Derrida attempted to play both inside and outside the frame with his particular style of making declarative statements, asking incessant questions, and playing word games, “reminiscent of a small child determined to find the truth . . . ‘opening up’ the untruth of parental conventions” (Schneider Adams, 1996, p. 165). Demonstrating our preference for such child-like practices, it seems to us that there is something lacking in these photographs *and* in the accounts that Mizen gives of them. These are low-pay, low-status, “nasty” jobs in some cases (clearing up after other people, looking after other people’s children, with a lack of autonomy, and so on), and this sort of work is often unseen. This is another element of what it means to work in service industries, where the middle-class maintain their quality of life in part

through the low-paid, invisible, labours of the (increasingly immigrant) workforce. Is Mizen then providing us with a critique of what it means to work in the low-paid “service sector” and how New Labour policies, for example, have made it easier for employers to exploit their employees? We cannot answer these questions because we do not learn anything about the social context in which these young people are growing up (apart from their generalised geographical location somewhere in the “South Wales valley” or an “East Anglian coastal town”). Neither do we know whether these are jobs that they might engage in later, full-time, or whether they go on to use their experience to help them gain access to vocational or professional courses they may wish to follow. In fact we know little more about the circumstances of these young people than we do about those of van Gogh’s shoes in 1886. Yet Mizen informs us:

in combination with their written accounts, the children’s images are revealed as packed with information and rich in detail and insight. They provide a “different order of data” about these children’s working lives . . . contained in these photographs are a means of understanding, that help to reassemble the fragments of knowledge currently held about a neglected dimension of children’s lives. (2005, p. 138)

Notwithstanding such a claim, we suggest that Mizen wants to tell a particular story about the “travails” (loaded) of these children’s labour, and like Jameson he might “shoot himself in the foot” if he also made clear that, in fact, most of them were only “passing through”. Similarly, he does not want to turn this into a story about service-sector jobs because he wants us to see these “child” workers as very distinct from adults, in order to underline the exploitation of the young people he worked with, and to express the gap between Keynesianism and market economic ideologies. He uses the word “children” and “child labour” throughout, even though none of them are under the age of 13. The paper is constructed to suggest that this “light work” is just one way in which “innocent” children are exploited by the “nasty” adults in their lives. An argument is set up that would break down if it also acknowledged the low pay and poor conditions of many (adult) service-sector workers. An alternative analysis might suggest that Fiona’s employer is looking “displeased” because she too is low paid and exploited. Similarly, it is possible surely that Noel’s boss is “never in the shop” because he has several other low-paid part-time jobs elsewhere. Certainly the shelves in the shop are empty enough to suggest he earns little from this particular source. We have already referred to the (suppressed) possibility of humour in these images. Achieving answers to these questions would not be an end in itself, but rather would open up opportunities for other possible stories and truths, and for a consideration of alternative explanations and interpretations. We consider that this would provide an important contrast to Mizen who shows us what was showed to him, ostensibly to “illuminate” these young people’s lives, but in the end parades them voyeuristically. We suggest that he fails to show us anything beyond his own intention and desire, which has become the subject of the image. Through the enthusiasm of this storyteller we see how his “presence and life [are] impressed into the tale” (Taussig, 1993, p. 200).

### The Framing of Image-based Research

As with Heidegger, Mizen is keen to get at the truth of things. In Heidegger's case this truth is represented by the shoes, rather than the painting of the shoes, as art reveals to us the ultimate thingness of things in their origin. Mizen distinguishes between researchers making records *of* rather than records *about* young people, claiming that the decisions about what to record, and how to frame the photographs, and so on, was left to the "children" (Mizen, 2005, p. 126). (Of course we now know that was not true in at least one case.) However, the truth somehow emerges "beyond this illustrative function" (the photographs) from which Mizen ventriloquises the truth "about the travails of a child worker", so as to reveal the thingness (travails—the signified) in their origin (the photographs—the signifier).

Mizen avoids the difficulty Schapiro encountered, of rooting the shoes to the spot (when he restituted them back to van Gogh) by having the children "sign over their copyright of the photographs to the project" (adding that none refused). This perhaps left him freer to insert his own interpretations, while claiming to know what they "really" signify. Yet Mizen's certainty seems reminiscent of Schapiro's. And, like Jameson who wanted the shoes to signify fetishism, and a modernist aesthetic belief in art's ability to conjure "presence" (like Heidegger), Mizen wants the photograph to signify how "young people have been forced to bear a disproportionate burden of the costs of state restructuring". While we may share similar sentiments we would not seek to exclude adults from such an analysis and we do not agree that these photographs even begin to make this point, let alone the other claims that are made.

All who set about interpreting any work of art are carrying what might be termed our "own iconoclastic baggage" (Bernstein, 2004). We suggest that adults need to attempt to "unlearn their own privilege" in order to conduct a different sort of interpretation or analysis. This could usefully begin with a recognition of the complexities of understanding "difference", an acknowledgement of *not* knowing or understanding, and a reflexive (and more ethical) engagement (see Spivak, 1988; Stronach, Garratt, Pearce, & Piper, 2007). This should include a consideration of what is not being said—a challenge to the transparency of the "gaze". In estranging what has become familiar and comfortable there is the potential to see something different, something to trouble our assumptions, and reveal our unknowingness to us. A new series of questions might then open up: What is it that I cannot know about because of who I am? How might I explore what I cannot know? What do the gaps in my understanding suggest in terms of the status of the things I think I *do* understand? The metaphor of the frame is useful here; what might be outside those photograph "frames" that would affect my readings of what is inside the "frames"? What multiple forms of unknowingness are thus revealed to me? Unfortunately Mizen uses his "gaze" so as to distance, objectify and master the object (the "children"), and uses his words (not theirs) in order to relay his own assumptions via proxy indicators.

We would not wish to be interpreted as challenging the value of photovoice work with young people but rather the opposite. We acknowledge that "artworks may,

with strong limitations, provide impetus for changes in theories” (Miller, 1999). We would agree “that the privileging of the linguistic model in the study of representation has led to the assumption that visual artefacts are fundamentally the same . . . as any other cultural text” (Evans & Hall, 1999, p. 2). However, using images produced by young people brings with it a particular set of problems, alongside the very strong attraction these forms also have. Photographs, in particular, seem susceptible to naïve and realist interpretations superimposed by those who are “reading” them.

We believe that photovoice work carries with it a particular risk and responsibility arising from its mimetic qualities, and we wish to encourage debate about the challenges involved. In Barthes’ (1981) terms, “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (p. 87), and “by nature, the photograph has something tautological about it: a pipe here is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the photograph always carries its referent with itself” (pp. 5–6). In this way, he suggests, the photograph keeps “deceiving” us—it allows us to know the referent, rather than the image of the referent. Thus whereas the author has been silenced, the image appears to “speak” (Wike, 2000). This, we believe, helps to explain authors’ claims to have access to the truth of the images they describe. In contrast, we are interested in the additional challenges this raises for us as researchers. We would argue it is just as likely that a photograph acts as a “trap”. In other words, the still image is made to mean something because it has been made significant through its fixing in photographic form. It could also be argued that photographs, because of their mimetic quality, encourage us to tell singular truths about them, in contrast to interview transcripts, where people move unconsciously between positions, writing and re-writing themselves as they talk. Rather than providing access to an “essential” self, one could equally argue that photographs make us stand apart from the self when providing interpretation or commentary. This seems to us inevitably the case, whatever the methods employed. As a consequence, the truths that are elicited need to be interrogated in relation to the medium and method, and not accepted independently from them. We would like to see further research about the particularities of these (and no doubt other) possible effects, and a reflexive inclusion of the issues raised in the analysis of photographs in any social analysis. Only with such an approach, we would argue, are we likely to see the real possibilities and limits on the contribution of photovoice work in pupil voice activity, and other contexts.

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## **Notes**

1. Somewhat in contrast to some of the ideas discussed here, the charity PhotoVoice explicitly state that the photographs they support others in taking are used to lobby and organise for social change. It is not the photographs, per se, that will “make a difference” but the ways in which they are used to communicate with policy makers.

2. See [http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j001/articles/art\\_wort.htm](http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j001/articles/art_wort.htm).
3. Further commentary is available in Crimp (1977), Singerman (1994), Glendinning (1998), and Kelly (2003).
4. See International Labour Organisation's *Minimum Age Convention*, No. 138.
5. From <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academic/mizenp/>.

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